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NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

ALGERIA: A COUNTRY IN CRISIS

CORE COURSE 4 ESSAY

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Algeria today is a country a crisis. The country is on the brink of social collapse as militant Islamic fundamentalists challenge the oppressive measures of the current regime. The tighter the constraints imposed by the Army, nominally in political control, the greater the violent reactions of the militant groups. The more the factions battle, the more the likelihood of achieving a peaceful resolution recedes.

How did Algeria get to this state of affairs? Are there any solutions? Neither question has a simple answer.

Although the current violent phase of conflict essentially emerged in 1988, the roots of the struggle reach back decades to the French colonial period. Algeria was not just another colony under European rule. Algeria literally became part of France. Millions of French citizens emigrated there. The official language was French, with most jobs requiring that language. Algerians had a foot on both sides of the Mediterranean as they became citizens of France, with westernization superimposed on their Arab, Islamic culture.

In the 1950's, Algeria began a struggle to separate from France, culminating in liberation in 1962. When the French left the region, it marked the departure of the functional middle class. A heavy program of Arabization was begun in an effort to establish a national identity, but a strong undercurrent of

French culture remained with most post-independence Algerians having dual citizenship as well as cultural reinforcement through ready access to French newspapers, radio and television, and strong family ties with the two million Algerians living in France. Although Arabic was proclaimed as the national language and university and schools taught in Arabic, French remained essential for most jobs (NYT 7 DEC 70). The Berbers, a sizable ethnic group in Algeria, were also dissatisfied and demanded (and got) promotion of the Berber language and culture (NYT 25 APR 80). Rather than establishing an Algerian national identity, these efforts had added to the identity crisis.

The fledgling government adhered to socialism and embarked on an ambitious program to exploit the oil and natural gas in the region. The heavy industrial base required to sustain this economic program absorbed a huge percentage of revenues in capital investment. The jobs created by the new state run industries were to cure all social ills, however, little emphasis was placed on job training, with the result of population migrating to industrial centers with the prospects of finding employment, but without the skills required to take advantage new jobs (CSM 2 JAN 75).

As a corollary and a consequence, agriculture began to decline. A program of collectivized agriculture and large government food subsidies did little to improve the situation.

In 1974, Algeria imported nearly 50% of its food (CSM 6 MAY 74); by the middle of the 1980s, it was 70%(WP 9 Mar 83). Compounding the problems of unemployment and low agricultural production, Algeria's birthrate hovered around 3.5% throughout this period (doubling the population about every fifteen years). Official policies toward population were to encourage growth; for instance, contraceptives were available only to women who already had at least four children (NYT 2 DEC 74). This has led to a very young population (recent estimates are that over 70% of Algeria's population today is under the age of thirty) for which the war for independence has little relevance. This widening gap between those in power and the majority of the people began leading to dissatisfaction in the 1970s as the post war population began to grow up (WP 16 APR 85).

When Chaldi Benjedid became president in 1979 following the death of Houari Boumediane, who had been the president for nearly fifteen years, he began gradually loosening the strict socialist establishment in place since independence, and cautiously began reforms. Benjedid noted "among the errors we made was not starting with small or medium-sized enterprises..... We took on large projects that we were not ready to manage, and they became a burden instead of a resource(WP 6 FEB 88)." Recognizing the problem, however, will not provide instant solutions. Benjedid's pragmatic reform efforts were stifled by old guard socialists of the National Liberation Front (FLN), Algeria's only political party since independence (WP 12 MAR 87).

Although there had been periods of unrest and sporadic violence throughout the 1980s, things came to a head in October 1988. A state of emergency was declared 6 October 1988 after three days of rioting in Algiers. Particular targets for arson and vandalism were government buildings and businesses catering to the affluent. The army was deployed to control the situation that was described in an army communique as "Young people manipulated by the enemies of the Algerian people and its revolution have sacked public buildings, looted public and private property, violated private homes and harmed the very symbols of the national patrimony (WP 7 OCT 88)." In a foreshadowing of what was to come, the National Liberation Front stated that the situation would be dealt with "with the utmost vigor (WP 7 OCT 88)." This marked the beginning of increasingly harsh measures directed against popular violence.

Protest against the socio-economic state of affairs (climbing food prices, rampant unemployment, overcrowding in the cities with acute housing shortages, growing inflation, and an increasing disparity between the "haves" and the "have-nots") spread quickly to urban areas throughout the country. As the disturbances spread, the Army began firing on protestors in an escalating confrontation that finally subsided after six days. Unofficial estimates were 250 dead, 1000 wounded and 3000 arrested (NYT 16 OCT 88).

These riots of October 1988 provided an atmosphere which Islamic fundamentalists seized upon and exploited. Although the initial riots appear to have been spontaneous protests against the government, Islamists took the opportunity to focus and feed the discontent and provided structure to the disaffected youth of the country. "The fundamentalists didn't start things, but once the unrest got going they exploited it, encouraged and incited young people. They surely have benefited from this. How much, no one knows (Western diplomat qtd in NYT 16 OCT 88)."

Occasional instances of militant fundamentalist violence had occurred previously. Fundamentalists had taken over a mosque at Laghouat oasis in 1981 following the arrest of the local head of the Moslem Brotherhood (WP 6 OCT 81). Instances of acid thrown on University women wearing western clothing and the murder of two male students were attributed to Militant Islamists in 1983 (WP 9 MAR 83). But for the most part, the government thought it had gained control of militant Islamic movements by controlling the mosques. One news story reporting on the conditions in Algeria of the early 1980s stated "Islam's contribution seems to be minimal and Algeria appears relatively unmarked by the fundamentalist revival in other Moslem countries. The clergy are paid by the state and carefully controlled (NYT 31 OCT 84)."

Known fundamental extremists were jailed in an attempt to keep the movements controlled.

But the leaders who emerged in 1988 were neither clergy nor previously known. One particular group cited was the Movement for Algerian Renewal, a part of the Islamic Brotherhood, led by Ali Ben Hadj, a high school teacher. "We know nothing about him, but he has certainly emerged as the leader, if anyone is leading them" noted a western diplomat at the time (NYT 16 OCT 88). Another leader of note was Abassi Madani, a professor at the University of Algiers.

Chalidi Benjedid responded to the protests by attempting to open up the political system. His intention was to relax the National Liberation Front (FLN) party by allowing more than one candidate or perhaps allowing independents to stand for election. Benjedid said that he could allow different political tendencies to develop as long as they did not threaten the state (CSM 3 NOV 88). In a November 1988 national referendum, 92% of the votes cast were in favor of reducing the power of the FLN (CSM 7 NOV 88). Perhaps too complacent that the mosques (and hence the fundamentalists) were under control, Benjedid took another step by allowing a referendum in February 1989 which overwhelmingly endorsed a multi-party political system. Among the groups that announced intentions to form parties were the Rally for Culture and Democracy (Berber cultural movement) and the Islamic Salvation Front. The state indicated that it would tolerate the Islamic party if it employed dialogue but not violence.

With this recognition, the first legalized Islamic party in the Arab world came into being (CSM 1 MAR 89).

The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which had been an underground movement, came into the open with surprisingly large support and sophisticated organization. The government began to realize that they had underestimated the degree of unrest among the youth and the degree of support the FIS could garner. The Minister of Economic Affairs, Ghazi Hidouci, stated in February 1990, "We have made mistakes. We thought they were less dangerous than the smugglers and the jobless. We thought Ali Belhadj could keep them under control. But by dialoguing with him, we have only strengthened him (L'Express 9 FEB 90)."

The government, starting to recognize the magnitude of the threat to FLNs power base, postponed promised local elections. The FIS responded by holding a silent, disciplined march of tens of thousands of supporters and again, sporadic outbursts of violence directed against symbols of secular Algeria (women in western clothing, restaurants, and nightclubs) broke out (WP 21 APR 90). Fearing another wave of riots, and still underestimating the extent of FIS support, elections were allowed in June 1990.

In an election boycotted by two major centrist parties (who claimed they were rigged in favor of the government), the FIS won 53% of the vote with the LFN coming in second with 34% and the Berber party (Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD)) coming in a

distant third with 8%; eight other minor parties split the remaining vote (NYT 14 JUN 90). While many Algerians said that they cast their vote as a protest against the government rather than for the Islamists, the overwhelming victory for the FIS was a huge boost to their momentum even though voter turnout overall was only about 65%. The Islamists now had their chance having won 32 of the 48 regional assemblies and over half of the 1541 municipal councils (WP 15 JUN 90).

At this point, the national government took a wait and see attitude, while working on a strategy for parliamentary elections. The new local governments had little success in making significant changes in the lives of their constituents. Most changes were symbolic rather than substantive (such as requiring veils for women and banning the consumption of alcohol in restaurants), serving to alarm the secular middle class, and providing fuel for the media. The FLN encouraged development of more and more parties (more than 50) in the hopes of splitting the FIS vote in national elections. Further, in preparation for the elections, new laws, including gerrymandering of voting districts, were enacted favoring the FLN. These new laws set off a wave of protest from the FIS which led to an attempted (unsuccessful) general strike and then street demonstrations. These demonstrations gave the government the excuse needed to postpone the general elections, broaden the police powers of the army and to jail FIS leaders (CSM 13 JUN 91 and CSM 10 OCT 91).

Now feeling more confident, the government rescheduled elections for December 1991. One government official estimated the elections would result in a 25-30% share for the FIS, about the same for the FLN, and the remaining parties splitting the rest of the vote (NYT 24 DEC 91). The election results surprised and dismayed the hardliners in the FLN. Forty-nine parties ran 5,712 candidates for 430 seats. FIS won 189 of the 206 seats determined in the election, with runoff elections scheduled to determine the remaining 224 seats in Parliament (NYT 29 DEC 91). With FIS needing only another 28 seats to have a clear majority, hardliners in the government had had enough of the experiment.

Led by two army generals and the head of the secret police, a state crackdown ensued. The army was deployed, political activity (and all other non-religious activities) were banned from mosques, all political parties based on religion or ethnic grounds were dismantled and banned. Chaldi Benjedid was forced to resign and was replaced by a five-man High Security Council (NYT 14 JAN 92 and NYT 23 JAN 92). An anonymous senior government official predicted the results: "Maybe it is just a tumor that needs surgical interference to remove it. If so, you can use the army to do it and it will be over. But if we are wrong, and if it's not just a passing phenomenon and we use violence to repress them, it could leave a terrible frustration and provoke a violent reaction (NYT 9 JAN 92)."

" A violent reaction" is an understatement in the context of Algeria today. The FIS, as a legal and accepted political party, was easy to penetrate and its leaders were well-known. These leaders were arrested and the party was forced underground. This has led to radical elements taking over the Islamic fundamentalist movement in Algeria. When the army put down street demonstrations with force, a radical wing of FIS responded by ambushing and killing six policemen (NYT 11 FEB 92). Arson and terrorist bombs targeted universities, schools, state-owned enterprises and private businesses (WP 10 MAY 92). The government responded with tougher anti-terrorist laws and ordered dismantling of all public, charity, business, or private enterprise with connection to the fundamentalists (NYT 15 OCT 92 and NYT 6 DEC 92). The radical elements responded by targeting government officials, judges, intellectuals and foreigners for assassination. This has led to even more instability as the intellectuals (who tend to be more moderate) flee the country, along with the foreigners who are taking Algeria's economic hopes with them (CSM 5 JAN 94).

Many elements of full-scale guerrilla warfare are evident in Algeria today. The militant groups are organized into well-armed, highly mobile cells. Outside the urban areas, they operate in heavily forested and mountainous regions which are almost totally under their control. Street riots have evolved into full scale gun battles with the army. The factor that may be

stopping a well-organized insurrection is that the fundamentalists aren't well-organized. The current situation more closely resembles gang warfare than guerrilla warfare. There are at least three identifiable factions, the "Afghans," the Islamic Army, and the Algerianization current who are not only fighting the government and each other, but also the Berbers who are taking advantage of the situation to press their own demands. As the splits grow wider, the various groups are informing on each other and allowing the government to chip away at the leadership. But the movement is too wide spread to be stabilized by government repression. Algeria is now in a vicious cycle with little prospect for peace and stability in the next few years (Al-Watan Al-Arabi 25 JUN 93).

With the moderate elements in jail or overseas, there is no one to control the radicals. Even if Abassi Madani, one of the founding members of FIS and the most able to "maneuver and reconcile currents, alliances, elements and components" (Al-Watan Al Arabi 25 JUN 93) was freed, it is unlikely he could succeed in restoring moderation. It is also unlikely that the hardliners in the LFN will be able to maintain what little control they have for much longer. The leadership, all veterans of the war for independence, are aging and the army is beginning to show signs of sympathy for the Islamic fundamentalist. In December 1992, 90 army officials were charged with handing over arms and intelligence to the fundamentalists. Since the army is largely

conscripted from the very elements most supportive of the fundamentalists, how long the leadership can retain control is questionable (WP 25 JAN 94).

With the government focusing so much effort on regaining control, the underlying problems are not being dealt with effectively. Consideration is being given to rescheduling the country's \$26 billion debt, but the government is reluctant to accept the conditions of the IMF. In the meantime, with 75% of revenues going to service the debt, a shortage of raw materials and spare parts has pushed production at government owned industries down to 50% capacity (Liberte 16 MAY 93). This is making a desperate unemployment problem even worse. A vigorous birth control program was begun in the middle of the 1980s, but it will take years for it to have any notable effect.

In January of this year, Liamine Zeroual was appointed by the five-man High Security Council to replace it as the head of Algeria's government. Zeroual will continue as Defense Minister, a circumstance that indicates little likelihood for a change in policy towards the fundamentalists and great likelihood for a pessimistic future for Algeria as the cycle continues (WP 31 JAN 94). Until the government establishes dialogue with the fundamentalist groups and economic reforms are initiated, there is little hope for resolution of Algeria's worst problems.

These prospects are very worrisome for neighboring North African countries and other Mediterranean nations. If the fundamentalists succeed in Algeria, they will join Iran and the Sudan as focal points for other fundamentalist groups in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and other countries of the region. Western nations face the prospects of massive numbers of refugees and the potential for Islamic cells forming within their own borders. France has already revised its citizenship laws to cut down on the number of Algerian refugees it will accept (Le Monde 20 MAY 93).

Algeria's problems are staggering, but the government must begin to take positive steps to resolve them, rather than trying to return to the old status quo. In the meantime, Algeria will continue to be a threat to the stability of the region and a source of concern for interested nations.

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